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SUBJECT: LEBANON: ZAHLE MP DISSATISFIED WITH AOUN AND
HARIRIS, SEES ENDURING CHRISTIAN-SHIA COOPERATION

Classified By: Ambassador Jeffrey D. Feltman for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)
) .

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) Zahle Member of Parliament Illy Skaff (allied with Michel Aoun) in early January shared with Ambassador Feltman and emboff his dissatisfaction from Aoun amidst continued frustration with the Hariris. Yet, asked about Hizballah, Skaff stated that Christian fears of Sunni fundamentalism and changing demographics necessitate a long-term Christian-Shia alliance. Skaff's distance from other opposition leaders -- he skipped the last three meetings called by Aoun for his parliamentary bloc -- leaves him without insight into clear next steps. But he believes the time is right to approach Aoun to help find a neutral presidential candidate. Skaff described lingering Syrian ideological and economic influence in the Biqa' despite deployment of the Lebanese Armed Forces to the border. End Summary.

SEEKING A BREAK FROM AOUN, BUT
UNWILLING TO RETURN TO THE HARIRIS

¶2. (C) "I didn't leave the Sunnis; they left me," Zahle Deputy Illy Skaff told Ambassador Feltman and Emboff on January 4, explaining his reluctant alliance with Aoun as a result of his problems with the Hariris. The Hariri family's first mistake, Skaff told us, was Rafiq Hariri's refusal to take the land Skaff used as collateral as payment for a Bank Med loan Skaff could not repay. Instead, the Hariris allowed interest payments to pile up, putting Skaff in a difficult bind.

¶3. (C) Skaff alleged that former Syrian Intelligence Chief in Lebanon Ghazi Kenaan (who, as Syrian Interior Minister, was found dead in his Damascus office in 2005) urged Rafiq not to let Skaff settle his debt to Bank Med. Kenaan's purpose was to use the debt to obtain control over a Zahle politician with a strong local following. Unpaid interest caused the debt to balloon from \$6 million to \$27 million until Rustom Ghazzali replaced Kenaan, and Skaff was able through a lawsuit to lower the value of his debt to \$10.5 million.

¶4. (C) The Hariri family's second mistake was Saad Hariri's determination to control the entire Zahle election list instead of building a real partnership with Skaff, where Skaff would have named candidates on the list rather than simply accept being one name on Hariri's list. Hariri underestimated Skaff's popular support: Skaff's alliance

(backed by Michel Aoun) of six candidates swept the slate, beating the Hariri list candidates in the election. In a third slight, Skaff alleged, occurred in July 2005 when Fouad Siniora was assembling his cabinet. Saad ordered Siniora to reject Aoun's proposal for four cabinet seats (one for Skaff, one for the Armenian Tashnaq party, and two for Aoun). The Hariri family just does not know how to deal respectfully with other Lebanese, Skaff commented.

¶5. (C) These Hariri mistakes created the opposition alliance.

Skaff had no choice but to join with Aoun. Today, March 14 leaders continue to make the same mistakes, Skaff told us, hinting that he is unhappy with his current opposition partners but can't find a credible excuse to change camps. While March 14 politicians have no problem changing their positions overnight, opposition politicians have their images to protect, Skaff told us, and cannot just "sell out Aoun." Now that he is committed, it will be hard to leave the opposition unless Aoun makes a drastic mistake. Skaff mentioned that Aoun is excitable and argumentative, and that he expects at some point Aoun will make a political mistake or cause a personal dispute that will allow Skaff to break from him. But while he has not broken with Aoun, Skaff also has not asked his followers to attend the Hizballah-Aounist demonstrations. Skaff also remains in touch with a few "deserving" March 14 politicians.

FEAR OF THE SUNNIS,
COMFORT WITH THE SHIA

¶6. (C) Although the current opposition alliance is a strange combination of divergent forces, Skaff stayed his belief that it has helped defuse Christian-Muslim tensions created by

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Hariri mistakes. Moreover, on a deeper level the Christian-Shia alliance makes sense, Skaff told us. Zahle constituents are neither pro-Hizballah nor pro-Aoun, however the alliance has helped reassure Zahle Christians surrounded by Muslims and increasingly afraid of Sunni extremism. By dividing the Sunni and Shia, Zahle has lowered Christian-Muslim tensions. Changing relative demographics are forcing the Christians to seek a long-term alliance and a split in the Muslim population.

¶7. (C) In terms that seemed to cross the line to outright racism, Skaff (like many of Lebanon's Christians, particularly those who find Aoun appealing) described his Zahle constituents' view of the Sunnis: inscrutable, unreliable partners, too close to Saudi Wahabists. They appear western but at times suddenly become violent or belie their western appearance. Skaff cited the town of Anjar, in his district, as an example of growing Sunni fundamentalism and the erosion of Christian power. Skaff's father had 95 percent of Anjar's votes, and even under Syrian pressure -- which of course was where the Syrians maintained their occupation headquarters -- Skaff retained about 50 percent, including many of the Sunnis. Today due to Hariri machinations and increasing Wahabi influence Skaff has just 3 percent of votes.

¶8. (C) What's more, Rafiq Hariri gave citizenship to 12,000 Syrians, Palestinians, and Bedouins in Zahle, changing the demographics in favor of the Sunnis. Skaff described seemingly moderate Lebanese nationalists such as Siniora as "moles" waiting to grab power and eventually fall back on aggressive Sunni positions. Sunni extremists are hiding behind Hariri protection. Skaff saw in the Internal Security Force's arrest of several Sunni terror groups not a reflection of a moderate Sunni force cracking down on terror, but a real threat of Sunni terrorist groups in Lebanon.

¶9. (C) In contrast, the Shia are "readable," honest about their views, and "have good hearts." Unlike Wahabist doctrine, there is no Shia ideology to wipe out other groups.

Iranian influence on Hizballah is just one of many normal Lebanese manifestations of regional issues, and is not a cause for concern, as long as one day the United States and Iran reach an agreement. Unlike the Sunnis, the Shia never used their weapons against Lebanon during the civil war. While there are no Christian churches in Saudi Arabia, Iran has a proven history of tolerating its Christian enclaves. Zahle Christians see conservative Sunni villages in the Biqa' and more moderate Shia villages.

NEXT STEP: FIND A CONSENSUS PRESIDENT

¶10. (C) Skaff could not predict what the opposition's next steps would be as he has not attended coordination meetings called by Aoun for three weeks. However he assessed that Hizballah's unwillingness to allow Nasrallah's image to deteriorate further will prompt action, possibly including resignations from public offices. Additional murders are also likely. Skaff asserted that so many people have diverse interests in Lebanon that people have no idea who is responsible for the assassinations; Skaff agrees a tribunal is needed and believes Aoun does as well.

¶11. (C) There is growing consensus that the next president must be a neutral candidate able to restore a strong Christian presidency. Many Christians believe Lahoud will be the last president if the crisis is not resolved soon. A strong Christian role in the government is also important to speak out against extremism, "without that anything could happen." For those reasons Aoun's advisors -- and maybe even Aoun himself -- may now be more ready to consider other Presidential candidates. Skaff characterized former Foreign Minister Fares Boueiz (son-in-law of former President Elias Hrawi, who died in July) as close to Aoun and acceptable to Hizballah, and Michel Sleiman as also acceptable to Hizballah. Jean Obeid is close with the Hariris but maintains channels with Syria. Riad Salameh and Michel Edde might also be acceptable, but Charles Rizk has allowed himself to become too closely identified with March 14.

BIQA' "HOSTAGE" TO SYRIA

¶12. (C) While Skaff has not visited Syria since the occupation ended, he made several observations about

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continued Syrian influence in the Biqa'. Syrians are present and Shia on the border sympathetic. Syrian Social Nationalist Party members in small pockets comprise about 3 percent of the total Biqa' population and are ideologically loyal to greater Syria, rather than to the Syrian government.

The Biqa' is an economic "hostage" to Syria as overland transport to other markets is the only cost effective means to get its barely competitive goods to market. Market forces drive continued smuggling despite Lebanese Armed Forces deployment to the border. The economy remains weak and political payouts declined when Hariri list candidates did not take Zahle. Muslim as well as Christian youth are emigrating when they can to find work.

FELTMAN